

1 implement the embodiments described above can be implemented using disc
2 storage as well as other forms of storage including Read Only Memory (ROM)
3 devices, Random Access Memory (RAM) devices; optical storage elements,
4 magnetic storage elements, magneto-optical storage elements, flash memory, core
5 memory and/or other equivalent storage technologies without departing from the
6 present invention. Such alternative storage devices should be considered
7 equivalents.

8 The present invention is preferably implemented using a programmed
9 processor executing programming instructions that are broadly described above in
10 flow chart form, and which can be stored in any suitable electronic storage
11 medium. However, those skilled in the art will appreciate that the processes
12 described above can be implemented in any number of variations and in many
13 suitable programming languages without departing from the present invention. For
14 example, the order of certain operations carried out can often be varied, and
15 additional operations can be added without departing from the invention. Error
16 trapping can be added and/or enhanced and variations can be made in user
17 interface and information presentation without departing from the present invention.
18 Such variations are contemplated and considered equivalent.

19 While the invention has been described in conjunction with specific
20 embodiments, it is evident that many alternatives, modifications, permutations and
21 variations will become apparent to those skilled in the art in light of the foregoing
22 description. Accordingly, it is intended that the present invention embrace all such
23 alternatives, modifications and variations as fall within the scope of the appended
24 claims.

25 What is claimed is:
26
27

1. A television set-top box, comprising:
 - a tuner for receiving signals representing television programming and delivering the signals representing television programming to a display interface;
 - a central processor;
 - a bar code reader, operatively coupled to the central processor, to read bar codes; and
 - program means, running on the central processor, for receiving bar code information from the bar code reader.
2. The apparatus according to claim 1, further comprising a communication device, operatively coupled to the central processor, suitable for sending and receiving data over a communication medium.
3. The apparatus according to claim 2, wherein the program means further communicates with the communication device to send information obtained from the bar code reader to a service provider.
4. The apparatus according to claim 3, wherein the communication device further receives data from the service provider associated with the bar code.

1 5. The apparatus according to claim 4, wherein the data received from the
2 service provider comprises offers for products or services associated with the bar
3 code.

4
5 6. The apparatus according to claim 4, wherein the data received from the
6 service provider comprises uses for a product associated with the bar code.

1 7. A method of obtaining quotes, comprising:
2 at a set-top box, submitting a request for quote (RFQ) to a service provider;
3 at the service provider, resubmitting the RFQ to a plurality of vendors;
4 at the service provider, receiving a plurality of quotes from vendors; and
5 at the service provider, forwarding the quotes to the set-top box for
6 communication to a subscriber.

7
8 8. The method according to claim 7, further comprising, at the set-top box
9 sending a message to the service provider to accept a quote from one of the
10 plurality of vendors.

11
12 9. The method according to claim 8, further comprising, at the service provider,
13 notifying the one of the plurality of vendors of the acceptance of the quote and of
14 the identity of the subscriber.

15
16 10. The method according to claim 7, wherein the submitting is carried out by
17 navigating a hierarchical menu system to identify a product or service required, and
18 submitting the RFQ from the menu system.

19
20 11. The method according to claim 10, wherein the menu system comprises
21 selections for obtaining quotes, registering products and obtaining information.
22

12. The method according to claim 7, wherein the subscriber is identified to vendors at the time of submission of the RFQ only by an RFQ identifier.

13. The method according to claim 7, further comprising charging a subscription fee to the subscriber to permit submission of the RFQ.

14. The method according to claim 7, further comprising charging a per use fee to the subscriber to permit submission of the RFQ.

15. The method according to claim 7, further comprising charging a subscription fee to the vendors to receive the RFQ.

16. The method according to claim 7, further comprising charging a per use fee to the vendors to receive the RFQ.

17. The method according to claim 8, further comprising charging a fee to the vendor receiving the acceptance.

18. The method according to claim 8, further comprising charging a fee to the subscriber as a result of receiving the acceptance.

1 19. A method of registering a product, comprising:
2 at a set-top box, submitting product registration data to a service provider;
3 at the service provider, entering the product registration data into a database;
4 at the service provider, matching the product registration data to a plurality
5 of vendor registrations submitted by a plurality of vendors;
6 at the service provider, sending the product registration data to a plurality of
7 matching vendors;
8 at the service provider, receiving a plurality submissions from the plurality of
9 matching vendors; and
10 forwarding the submissions to the set-top box for communication to a
11 subscriber.

12
13 20. The method according to claim 19, wherein the subscriber is identified to the
14 matching vendors only by an alias.

15
16 21. The method according to claim 19, further comprising filtering
17 advertisements out for vendors selected by the subscriber.

18
19 22. The method according to claim 19, further comprising charging a fee to the
20 vendors for submitting vendor registrations.

1 23. The method according to claim 19, further comprising charging a fee to the
2 vendors for forwarding the submissions.

3
4 24. The method according to claim 19, further comprising charging a fee to the
5 subscriber for submitting product registration data.

6
7 25. The method according to claim 19, further comprising charging a
8 subscription fee to the subscriber to allow submission of product registration data.

9
10 26. The method according to claim 19, wherein the submitting of the product
11 registration is carried out by navigating a hierarchical menu system to identify a
12 type of product to be registered, and entering product detail.

13
14 27. The method according to claim 26, wherein the product detail is entered by
15 scanning a product code with a bar code reader associated with the set-top box.

16
17 28. The method according to claim 19, wherein the submitting of the product
18 registration is carried out by navigating a hierarchical menu system and entering
19 product detail by scanning a product code with a bar code reader associated with
20 the set-top box.

1 29. A method of obtaining information, comprising:
2 at a set-top box, submitting a request for information to a service provider;
3 at the service provider, receiving the request for information and matching
4 the request for information with a plurality of vendor submissions;
5 at the service provider, sending the plurality of vendor submissions to the
6 set-top box for communication to a subscriber.

7
8 30. The method according to claim 29, further comprising charging a fee to the
9 vendors for submitting vendor submissions.

10
11 31. The method according to claim 29, further comprising charging a fee to the
12 vendors for sending the submissions.

13
14 32. The method according to claim 29, further comprising charging a fee to the
15 subscriber for submitting a request for information.

16
17 33. The method according to claim 29, further comprising charging a
18 subscription fee to the subscriber to allow submission of requests for information.

19
20 34. The method according to claim 29, wherein the submitting of request for
21 information is carried out by navigating a hierarchical menu system to identify
22 information desired.

1 35. A television set-top box, comprising:
2 a tuner for receiving signals representing television programming and
3 delivering the signals representing television programming to a display interface;
4 a central processor;
5 a product identification reader, operatively coupled to the central processor,
6 to read a product identifier; and
7 program means, running on the central processor, for receiving information
8 from the product identification reader.

9
10 36. The apparatus according to claim 35, further comprising a communication
11 device, operatively coupled to the central processor, suitable for sending and
12 receiving data over a communication medium.

13
14 37. The apparatus according to claim 36, wherein the program means further
15 communicates with the communication device to send information obtained from
16 the product identification reader to a service provider.

17
18 38. The apparatus according to claim 37, wherein the communication device
19 further receives data from the service provider associated with the product identifier.
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1 39. The apparatus according to claim 38, wherein the data received from the
2 service provider comprises offers for products or services associated with the
3 product identifier.

4
5 40. The apparatus according to claim 38, wherein the data received from the
6 service provider comprises uses for a product associated with the product identifier.

7
8 41. The apparatus according to claim 35, wherein the product identification
9 reader comprises a bar code reader, and wherein the product identifier comprises
10 a bar code.